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Abstract:

## Working with leadership development and organizational learning from a dialogical perspective

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**Key words:** Dialogue, action research, organizational learning and reflexivity

### INTRODUCTION

These years we notice a considerable amount of research on top-down implementation of standardized concepts for organizational development and leadership. As an alternative to this trend we present and discuss a *dialogically based approach* to organizational learning and leadership development inspired by the notion of relational leading (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, Uhl-bien and Ospina 2012; Hersted & Gergen 2013) and action research (Ripamonti et al., 2016; McNiff et al., 2011; Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

This abstract presents and discusses an action research project involving ten public schools in the Northern region of Denmark. Focus of the project is on leadership and organizational development through dialogic practice with the use of reflective teams, over two years. The intention of the project was to enhance reflexivity (Cunliffe 2002, 2004) and learning among the school principals and school leaders with the aim of improving leadership and thereby support the teachers and pedagogues in their work to strengthen students' learning and wellbeing. In the first run, the project ran over a school year and was subsequently prolonged by a year. Rather than implementing a general training program for all leaders in the

municipality, the main idea behind the initiative was to create a space for reflexivity, knowledge building and learning through dialogue, based on the individual school's current challenges and special conditions.

The ten schools involved in the project each have their own history, background, demographics and socioeconomic foundation. Not surprisingly, each of these schools is characterized by having its own leadership style, school culture and identity.

The action research project was facilitated and carried out by the authors of this paper and the findings from the project have been read and validated by the participants.

## **GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION**

Our general research question is: How, in a *semiformal learning space*, can we work with leadership development and learning that can influence positively on several levels in a municipality with ten schools, each with very different histories, backgrounds, and socioeconomic foundations?

## **RESEARCH INQUIRY**

As stated above, we worked within the frame of action research where researchers and practitioners are engaged in co-constructing learning and knowledge through reflexive dialogues (Cunliffe 2002, 2004) and experimental actions.

In our approach to action research, which builds on a social constructionist perspective – “The Truth” is not a given in advance, but something, which is shaped socially and is therefore regularly negotiable. Thus, we cannot reach any form of objective recognition of "reality," but must regularly construct and reassess our understanding of it through relational processes and actions. In our approach, the action researcher is seen as an agent for change, as exploration, learning and knowledge production take place simultaneously (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006; McNamee 2010; Hosking & Pluut 2010; McNamee & Hosking 2012; Gergen 2015). In the project, we consciously worked on developing and practicing a dialogical approach to learning, change and knowledge production based on Shotter's notion of "*withness*"-thinking (Shotter, 2010) while hoping that this approach could inspire the leaders to apply practices informed by dialogue and discover new opportunities for action. We will unfold the inquiry

more fully in the paper. As part of the research project we have worked with the following empirical material:

- Reflections and knowledge generated in the dialogues with the leading teams. Field notes were taken along the way. Several sessions were recorded directly on audio file.
- Six months into the process, a mid-way interview of 1½ hour's length was made with the director for children and youth in the municipality, which was recorded on audio file.
- A dialogue-based evaluation was made in mixed groups at a joint leader seminar in the project's final phase, where the leaders shared their opinions of the process. The participants produced poster boards and presented their thoughts on the process in plenary session.

The empirical material has been condensed thematically and analyzed in relation to the overall theme of the paper, and the main themes have been compared and analyzed across the different forms of empirical material. The participants' evaluation at a leadership seminar in mixed groups constitutes a validation of the empirical data. The evaluation took place both through verbal and written communication through presentations and dialogues in plenary sessions, with the supplementary use of poster boards prepared by the participants themselves.

## **MAIN FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

The project addresses concrete issues, dilemmas and paradoxes that have been analyzed from different perspectives by the involvement of a reflecting team, and alternative potential actions have been discussed and tried out in practice (e.g. by use of roleplaying and video clips). These challenges have been studied from different perspectives in ways, which contributed to the learning about challenges in leadership at a more general level. The leaders have expressed that the dialogues and reflections in the groups have led to changes in their way of acting in their daily work in the organization. We notice that the main themes chosen by the leaders over time have shifted from the simple and operational to the more complex, visionary and long-term based (this will be unfolded more in the paper).

We find that the project has succeeded in creating a semi-formal learning space which has contributed to both first and second order reflexivity (Cunliffe 2002, 2004), informed by the ideas about relational leading and dialogically based collaboration, which we will explain and

discuss in the paper. In addition, the project has contributed to organizational learning at different levels in the local school district and the municipality as such. A special characteristic of this semiformal approach to learning is that it is flexible and is always based on the current context of the organization. It can be considered as a relational-responsive and adaptable approach to learning where the participants identify and work with the themes emerging in the here-and-now situation. Thus, we conclude that this kind of dialogically based approach to leadership development makes particularly good sense while it can contribute to higher levels of reflexivity concerning complex organizational challenges. Moreover, this semiformal approach has contributed to a closer and more generative dialogue between the schools and the municipality.

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